

I.
A DESCRIPTION
OF THE PLAIN

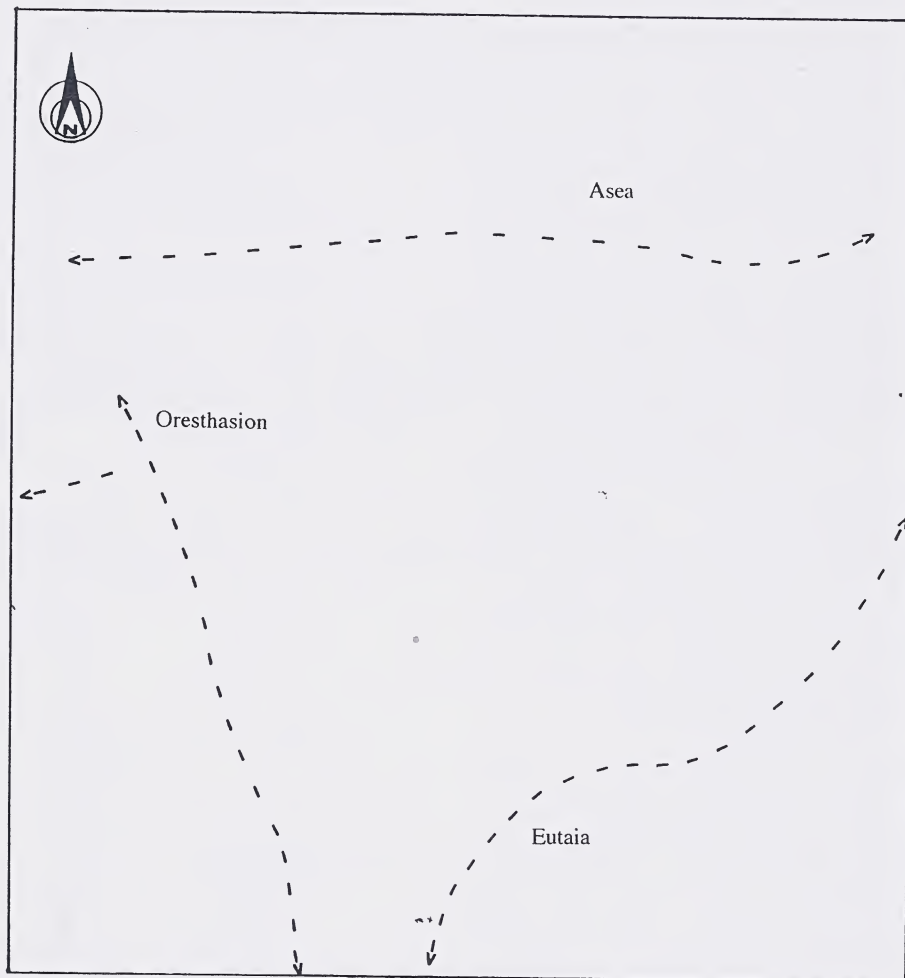


Fig. 1. Aseatis: The Road System.

An Historical Account

The plain of Asea is in fact the central plain of Arkadia (Pl. 1). A well defined road system provides connection with the plains of Mantinea and of Megalopolis while the Eurotas gorge leads directly to Sparta. Of the two roads most often used in military expeditions involving movements in a North-South or a South-North direction the plain of Asea possessed the Western one, the other way being *via* the Southern passes of the Tegean plain. The Asean plain was extremely fertile in Antiquity, just as it is today, extremely fertile. Both the Alpheios and the Eurotas rivers rise in Asean ground thus providing the plain with an excellent water supply. Three mountain peaks check all entrances; *Áyios Elías* in the North, *Tsemeroú* in the West, and *Gravári* in the East. As the crossroads to every part of the Peloponnesos, except perhaps Northern Akhaia, the Plain of Asea saw the continuous march of armies, foreign and Hellenic. When, early in the 6th century B.C., Sparta initiated a policy of acquiring control of territories with road networks and passes North of Lakonia, it became apparent that the region which leads directly into Eastern Arkadia had to be secured. Since that particular territory was controlled by the two powerful cities of Mantinea and Tegea Sparta had eventually to confront them if she was to secure the way to the North. The fact that Oresthasion, a Mainalian town (Thoukydides v.64,3), fought against the Spartans clearly indicates that the Lakedaimonians had as a first target the Plain of Asea, on which the town of Oresthasion was located.

With the eventual dominance of the Spartans on the Plain of Asea (6th century B.C.) Oresthasion was destined to become their furthest post to the North, guarding the entrances to the Plain and its entire road system. The Plain of Asea, being the possessor of a road system that

could accomodate military transport, became the direct way from Sparta to any Northern destination (pll. 2, 3, 4).

In 369 B.C., the Argives, Eleians, Thebans, and Arkadians, invaded Lakonia under the leadership of Epameinondas. According to Xenophon (*Hellenika* vi.5,21) the participants in the invading force met at Mantinea where they decided to enter Lakonia from various routes at the same time. While the Thebans followed the Sarantapotamos path to Karyai, the Arkadians entered Lakonia *via* the Plain of Asea on their way to Oion. Loring (1895: 62) wrote on the subject: "The Asean Plain intervening as it does between the two principle plains of Arkadia, (the Megalopolitan and the Mantinea-Tegean) was a natural meeting-place for the different Arkadian contingents." Loring was right to emphasize the importance of the Asean Plain in such military campaigns for a year earlier, when Agesilaos had marched against the city of Mantinea, the Arkadian contingents chose Asea as their meeting place (Xenophon, *Hellenika* vi.5,11-12). Agesilaos in turn realized the importance of the plain and so rushed to secure it by occupying Eutaea. Agesilaos' decision to secure the Asean Plain before marching on Mantinea proves the geographical importance of the region.

Physical Features

The Plain of Asea is an area surrounded by mountains which culminate a little over 1000m above sea level. The Plain itself is at an altitude of about 600m, a fact which influences climatic conditions in such a way as to maintain temperatures, throughout the year, lower than the neighbouring plains of Mantinea and Megalopolis. Snowfall in the mountains and frost on the plain occur in the months of December and January, often damaging the agricultural production. Pasture land is limited or even non-existent in certain parts, while plant life is represented by varieties of the oak family, the cypress, pine and platanos trees. Agriculture concentrates on the cultivation of cereals and legumes. The Plain itself is free of habitation sites *per se*, as was the case in antiquity, mainly because agricultural land is so highly valued. The Plain possesses the characteristics of a self-sustained economic unit, with villages located on the slopes of the surrounding mountains (the *Kámpos* being free for cultivation), with a road system to make communications possible and with an abundance of water.

Water Supply

The Plain of Asca enjoys an absolutely magnificent natural water supply system which, in contrast to the rest of Arkadia, runs either on, or very close to, the surface. Man-made wells are no more than 8 meters deep – a blessing for agriculture from antiquity to the present. The two great rivers of the Central and Southern Peloponnesos, the Alpheios and the Eurotas, have their springs here, and their courses transect the entire plain before making their way respectively West to Megalopolis and South to Sparta. This Southwesterly direction of both surface and underground water results in the creation of a marsh in that part of the plain which neighbours upon the Eastern slopes of *Tsemeroú*. Springs exist everywhere on the plain and on the sides of the surrounding mountains. A direct result of this abundance of water was the extended limits of inhabited sites. Communities here were not crowded around individual fortifications. Access to safe ground was easy in all cases while a well constructed road system helped mitigate against any possible isolation of these habitation centres.

The Road System (fig. 1)

Well cut roads, paved with stone and often supported by upper and lower retaining walls, can be seen throughout the Plain of Asca. Many are in use today since they seem to have been maintained successively by the Byzantine, Turkish and modern Greek authorities. The network of roads can be seen as starting from any of the three larger natural passes in and out of the Plain. Each mountain which descends to the Plain of Asca has a road cut on its slopes. A traveller could either circle or cross the plain in any direction he chose, never being far from a habitation site or from a natural spring. The major passes which lead into the Plain of Asca are six in number. Three of these are located on *Óros Tsemeroú* connecting the Plain of Megalopolis with that of Asca. The easiest way into the Plain from the West is beyond doubt that created by the Alpheios river. A *kalderim* exists there today which probably follows the ancient road Pausanias took when he visited the area (5,6.1-6.2). The Plain of Mantinea is accessed through the slightly inclined region on a North-Eastern direction from Asca. On the South the Eurotas gorge serves as a way into Lakadaimonian territory (fig. 1).

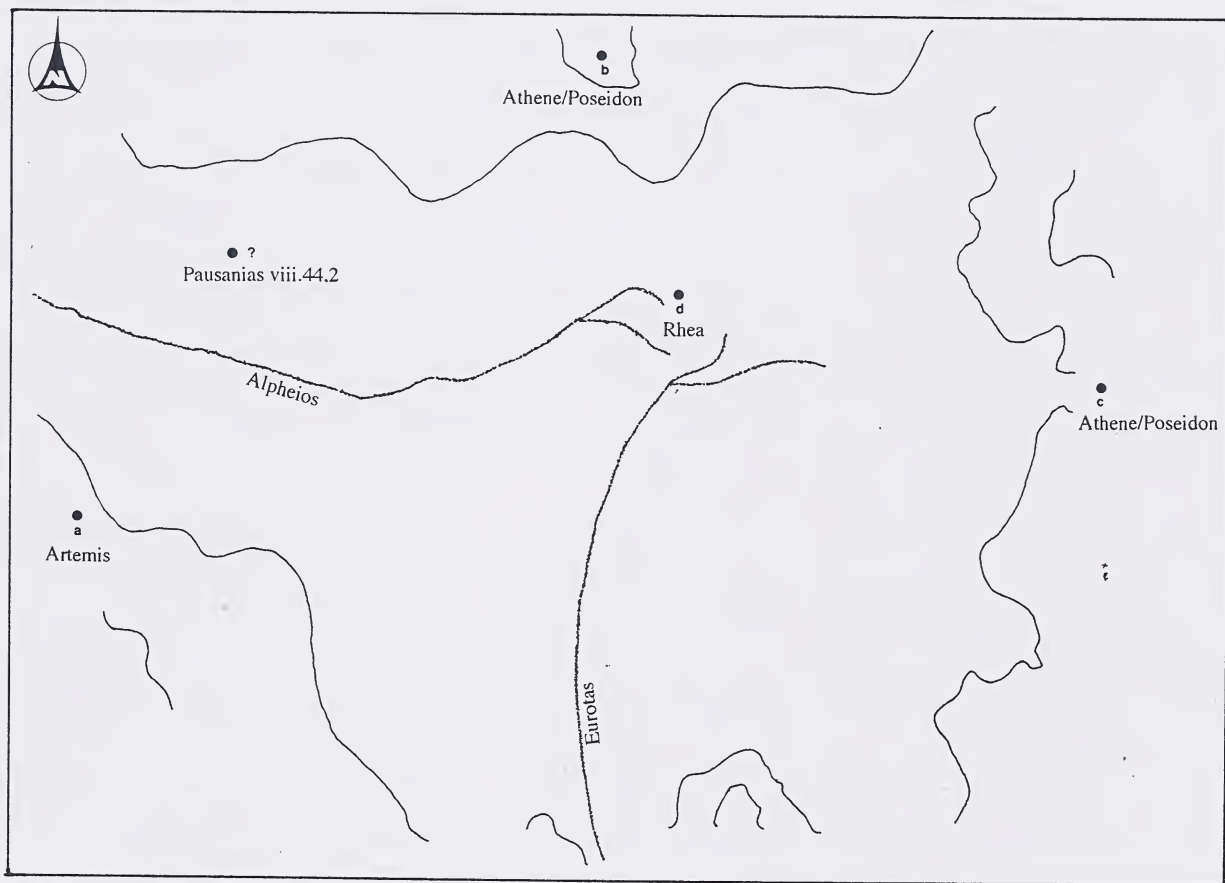


Fig. 2. Aseatis: Temples.

Temples (fig. 2)

The Ascan Plain was the host of four (possibly five if Pausanias viii.44,2 is to be relied upon) known temples which in turn fostered the worship of several deities from Archaic to Roman times. We know that near the village of Oresthasion on the Eastern slopes of *Tsemeroú* existed a temple dedicated to Artemis (a). Two temples built by Aseans, one on top of Boreion Oros and the other across the plain at the low gorge of *Óros Gravári* seem to have been dedicated to Poseidon and Athena Soteira (b, c). Lastly, what might have been a temple of Rhea/Kybele stood between the sources of the Alpheios and those of the Eurotas near Asea (d).

Previous Observations

The Plain of Asea began to receive the attention of scientific expeditions at the start of the 19th century. That has continued to our day with one main characteristic being still true; the Asean Plain has always been investigated either as a part of a larger topographical survey (Gell, 1817; Leake, 1830 & 1846; Loring, 1895; Curtius, 1851-52; Ross, 1841, 1848 & 1875; Bursian, 1872; Philippon, 1951?; Pritchett, 1982 & 1985; Pikoulas, 1988) or as means of comprehending a pan-Arkadian theme (Jost, 1973, 1974 & 1985) or at times of purely archaeological activity (Holmberg, 1939, 1941 & 1944; Romaios, 1918 & 1957). Never has a study been produced exclusively for the Plain of Asea.

Methodology

The field historian has by definition the countryside as his workplace. Apart from essential library research his questions can be answered only on the field. For some time excavation was considered to be the factor of difference between the archaeologist and the field historian. As the study of historical topography advanced, however, and the two types of investigation began to meet the field historian felt the need for a more specialized method of investigating historical events *in situ*.

The Case of the Asean Plain

Geographical assessments are generally done, of course, prior to a topographical survey and their aim is usually to help the investigator in

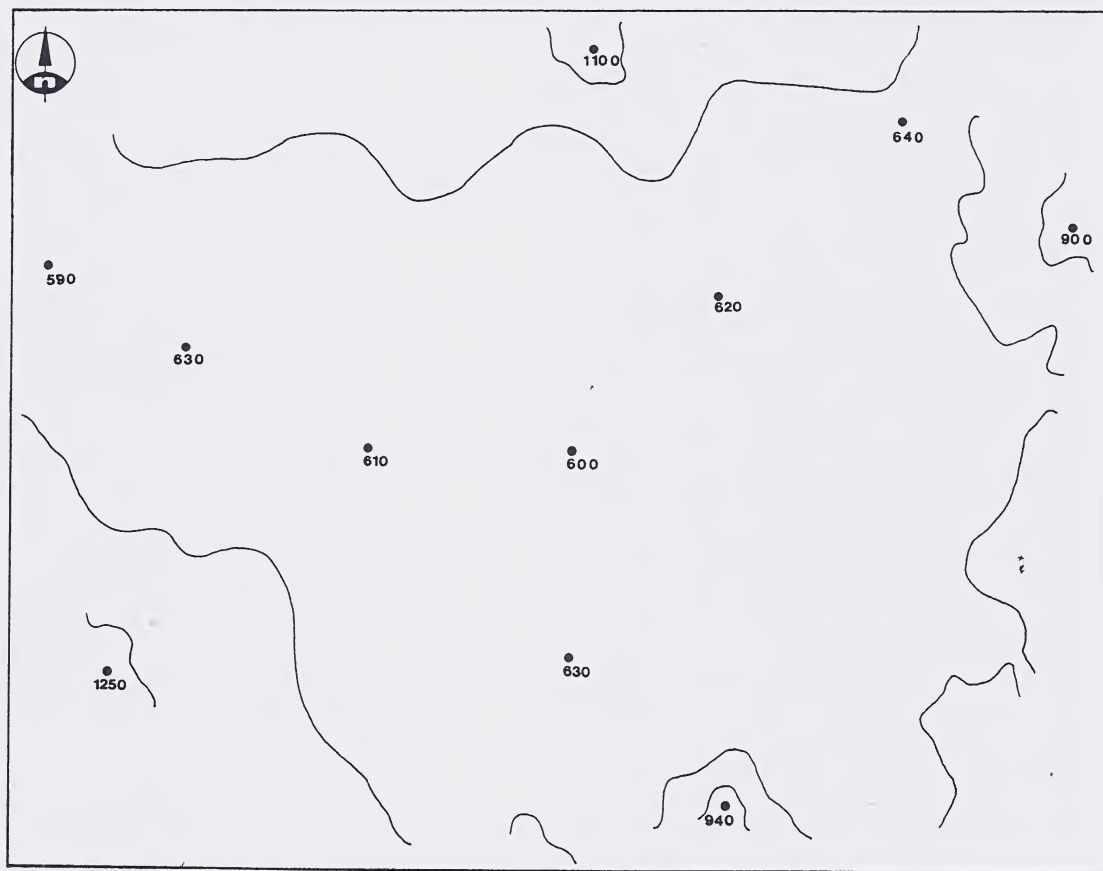


Fig. 3. Aseatis: Heights.

his movements and to define his priorities. We decided, however, to make it our main method of investigation. Having from the beginning decided to avoid extensive sherding as well as to refrain from tracing Pausanias' itinerary through the Plain of Asea we began with an analysis of the Plain's geographical features before setting course for visits on possible sites. It was our objective to decide which areas possessed the best characteristics as potential ancient sites. From the peak of *Óros Tsemberoú* (1254m) with the help of maps from the Hellenic Statistical Service we were able to formulate hypotheses on the following:

Heights (fig. 3)

The Plain is located at a height of about 600m above sea level. In certain parts it may even reach 670m but without forming a clearly noticeable hill. The four mountain peaks around the Plain reach the heights of 1100m (*Áyios Elías*), 940m (*Áyios Konstandínos*), 900m (*Gravári*) and 1250m (*Tsemberoú*).

Passes (fig. 4)

There are six main passes in and out of the Aseatis. The Western one starts from the level of the Plain of Asea and descends as it approaches the Plain of Megalopolis. At the Eastern end of the Asean Plain a slight climb leads into the higher plain of Mantinea. This can also be accomplished through the low pass, a little to the South of *Vígla*, at *Óros Gravári*. To the South the gorge created by the Eurotas River forms a comfortable way into Lakedaímon running virtually on the same level as the Plain until it reaches the much higher ground of *Skortsínou*. The fifth easily accessible pass is that formed by the Eastern slopes of *Óros Tsemberoú* at an altitude of about 700 to 750m, while the sixth goes through the site of *Áyios Ioánnes* at an altitude of 900m (fig. 4).

Slopes

In this case we asked the following questions: a) Which were accessible? Of all four, the Eastern slopes of *Tsemberoú*, the Southern slopes of *Áyios Ilías*, and the Western slopes of *Gravári* fitted the description. b) Which could have roads on their sides? In this case only *Tsemberou* looked probable. c) Which could enjoy a good view of the entire plain and its passes? We concluded that only *Tsemberoú*, and *Áyios Ilías* could control all entrances into the Plain.

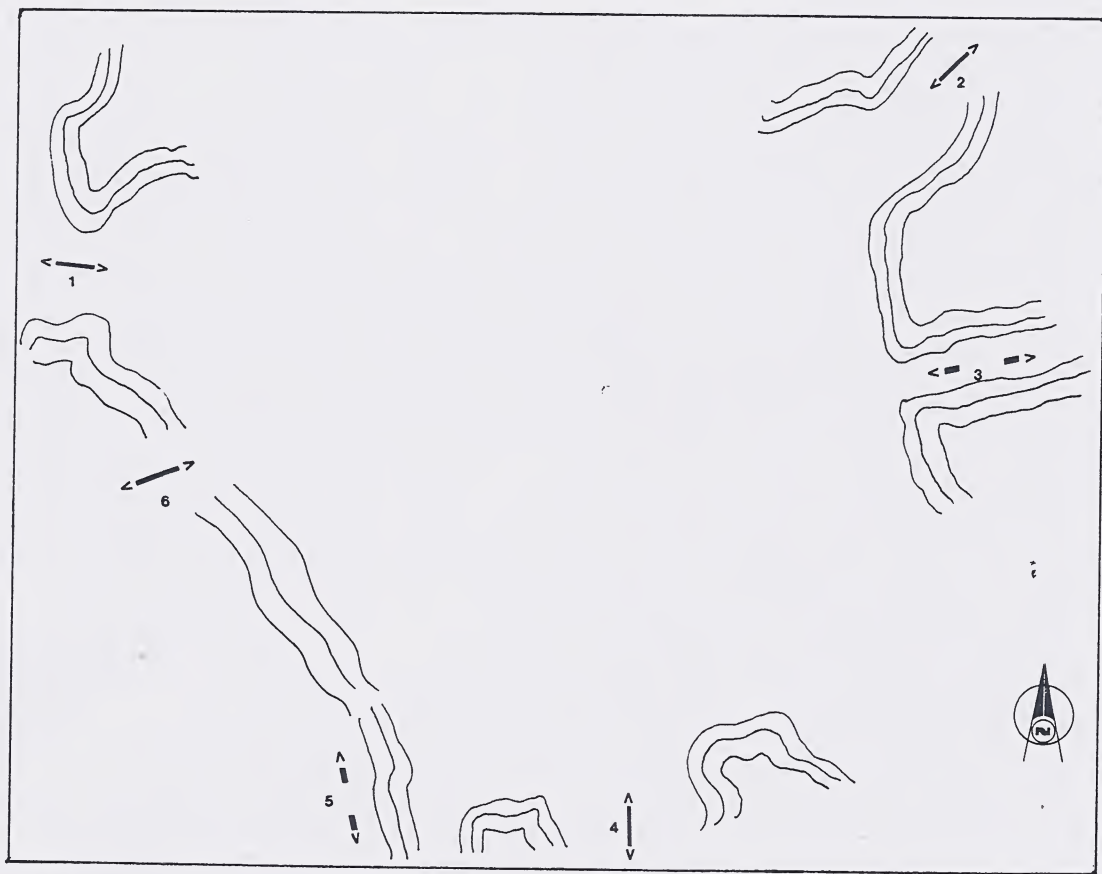


Fig. 4. Aseatis: Passes.

Rivers (fig. 5)

The Rivers Alpheios and Eurotas cut the Plain into three sections. They may be described by their natural limits: i) Alpheios to the left, *Áyios Ilías* to the right, ii) Alpheios to the right, *Tsemeroú* and Eurotas to the left, iii) *Gravári* to the right, Eurotas to the left.

Initial Conclusions

In attempting to set our priorities and eventually to establish spheres of influence and communal limits on the Plain of Asea we concluded that of the three principle communities on the Plain's soil, Oresthasion dominated the second section (see above), Eutaia the third, and Asea the first. *Tsemeroú* possessed the better maintained examples of the Plain's Road System, while the site of Oresthasion at the hill of *Ayía Triádha* on the North Eastern slopes of that mountain proved able to check all entrances into the Plain. Asea controlled, as was expected, the main trading route which ran through the Plain in an East-West direction while Eutaia checked the Southern limits of the Plain (fig. 6).

Having set our objectives on the pursuit of these central notions of communal arrangement, road network and passes we proceeded to examine first those areas which had already showed evidence and then those which we believed held promise.

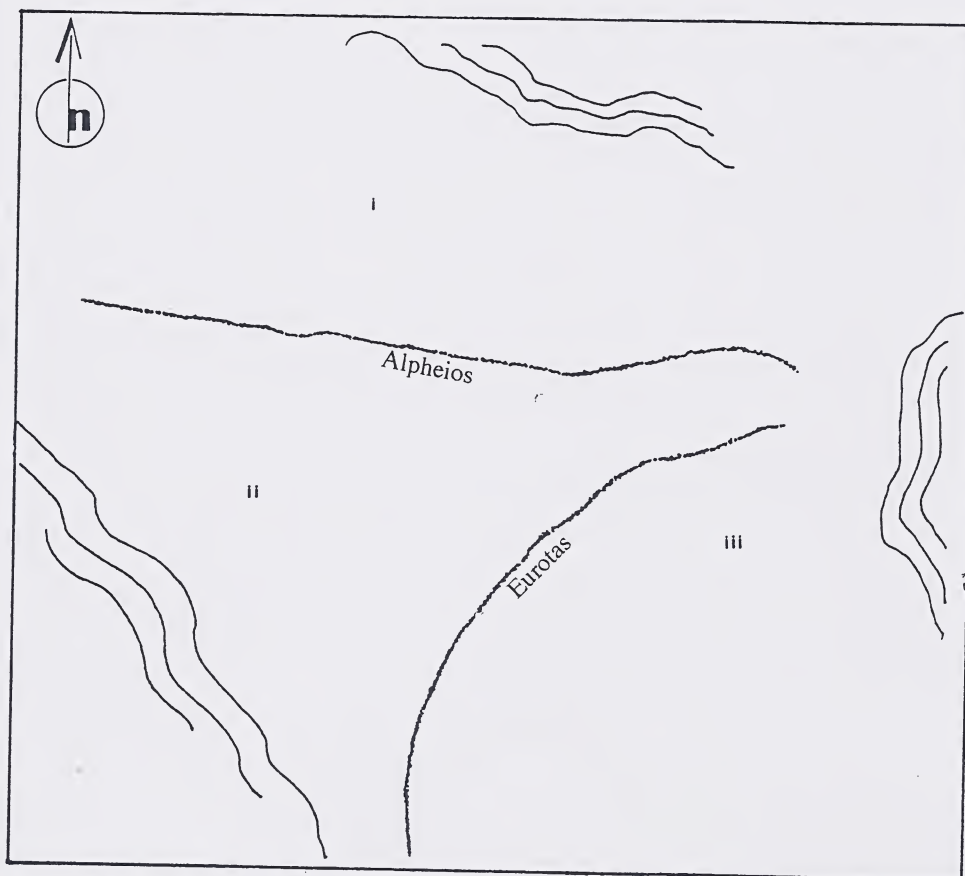


Fig. 5. Aseatis: Rivers.

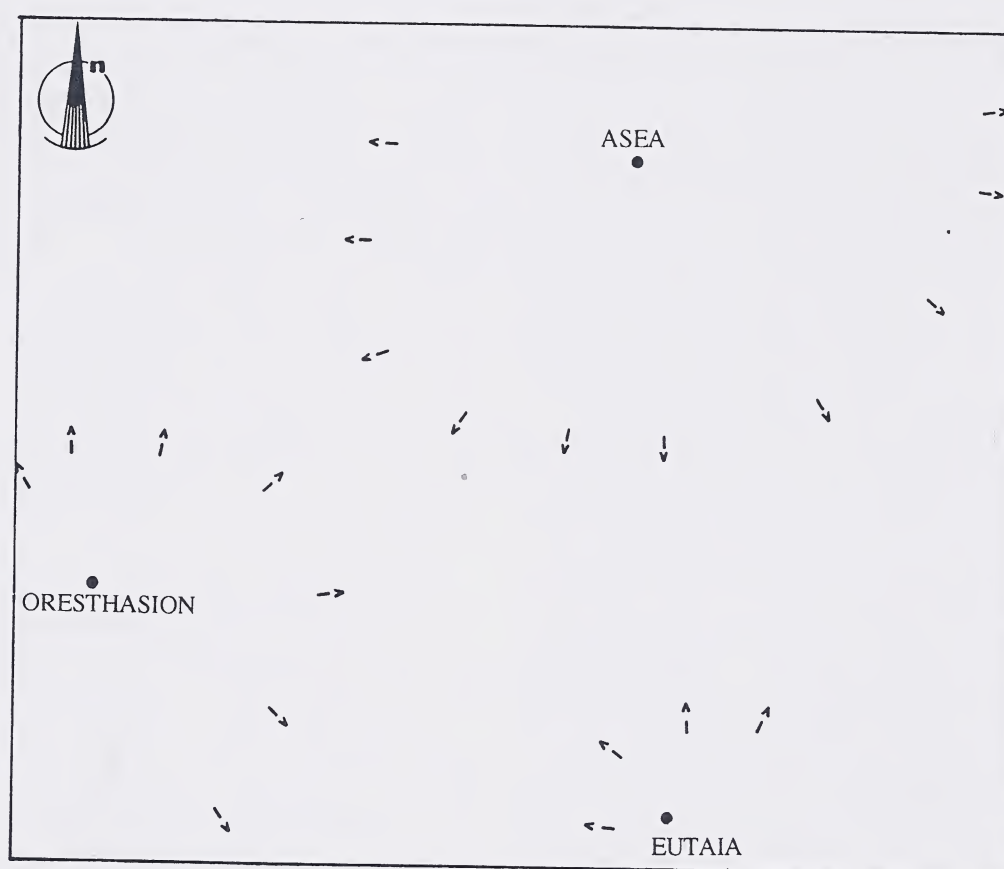


Fig. 6. Aseatis: Communal arrangement.